



CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR POLICY STUDIES



OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

OLEG KARMADONOV

The Problem of Deprivation and Inequality of Access to the Higher Education in the Russian Federation

2001/2002



OLEG KARMADONOV

The Problem of Deprivation and Inequality of Access to the Higher Education in the Russian Federation

The views in this report are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center for Policy Studies, Central European University or the Open Society Institute. We have included the reports in the form they were submitted by the authors. No additional copyediting or typesetting has been done to them.

Presentation of the Issue

As the base institution for the research the leading in EasternSiberiaIrkutskStateUniversity is being used. There are 16 graduate departments in the IrkutskStateUniversity, more than 13 000 students, and more than 700 professors and teachers are involved. The total number of the staff is 2500 people. There are traditional specializations here and new-born ones. To the first mentioned we attribute such disciplines as History, Philology, Journalism, Law, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Geography, Geology, Physics. During the last 15 years such graduate disciplines as Management, Economics, Psychology, Sociology, Public Relations, Social Work, International Relations were established. The necessity of appearance of these new fields was determined by both the demand of new social circumstances in Russia, and the need for financial survival of the University. About 30% of all enrolled students pay for their education now, from department to department this figure can vary, depending on prestige and perspectives of graduates. As well as the price for the study can vary. The average amount of fee in the IrkutskStateUniversity isUS\$2.000 per academic year.

The composition of students has undergone rather profound changes in recent time. First of all, regarding the geographical and social origin of applicants. During the Soviets the whole number of students enrolled was comprised almost proportionally of young people from cities and from country folk, of different social strata. Now about 87% of applicants and students are from region center and nearby cities, and those who are enrolled almost entirely (92%) come of the *white collar* families (see the Table attached). The reasons for this situation are rather simple and complicated at once. First of all – the quality of primary education and competitive ability of graduates from the country schools are very low nowadays. That is due to the chronic shortage of qualified and young teachers there, it is not unusual when certain disciplines are not taught at those schools at all.Naturally, when it comes to the competition of entrance these graduates fail every now and then. And when they fail due to their knowledge, they fail also due to their ability to enter by fee, because the living standard in the country is incredibly low and their families just can not afford to pay for Higher Education. Neither can the worker families in cities. And it is the problem, from the one hand these young people lack their competitive ability (doesn't matter that it is not their fault, generally speaking), and from the other hand there is obvious inequality of access

to the Higher Education in Irkutsk, and in Russia in general. The *Law on Higher and Professional Education of the Russian Federation* (1996) clearly tells that "The State ensures the priority of development of Higher Education with: ...; 2) broadening of the access of the citizens of the Russian Federation to Higher Education, inadmissibility of reduction of those students who are paid with the Federal Budget" (Chapter 1, Item 2. *State Policy and State Guarantees of the Russian Federation Citizens' Rights in the Field of Higher Education*). It stated also that "The competition's conditions should guarantee the citizens' rights in the field of Higher Education and ensure an enrollment of mostly able citizens who are prepared to the mastering of appropriate level's curriculum and program" (Chapter 2. *System of Higher and Professional Education*, Item 11. *Enrollment in the Institution of Higher Education*). The point is that the members of the whole social stratum could be considered now as "unable" and "unprepared" simply due to unhappy circumstances of their birth and the course of all their young life and primary education. The whole social stratum is deprived of the possibilities to obtain the higher education, hence – to increase their life chances and to improve their quality of living standard. One of the experts whom I told with put it very transparently – "The University is losing the country. And the country is losing its future".

Scope of the Problem

The recent history and the current situation on the topic in question are presented in the following chart.

The number and social-geographical origin of applicants and students of the Irkutsk State University in dynamics for the last 10 years. Source:

The records of the Admission Department of the Irkutsk State University.

Year	Plan of enrollment	Number of applications					Number of enrolled				
		General number	From Irkutsk and nearby cities (%)	From the other regions and the country (%)	From the white collar families (%)	From the families of workers and farmers (%)	General number	From Irkutsk and nearby cities (%)	From the other regions and the country (%)	From the white collar families (%)	From the families of workers and farmers (%)
1992	850	2320	55	45	56	44	860	60	40	57	43
1994	830	2200	57	43	60	40	800	63	37	63	37
1996	900	2560	67	33	58	42	920	72	28	75	25
1998	1200	3250	76	24	62	38	1210	80	20	77	23
2000	1260	3320	80	20	64	36	1260	83	17	85	15
2001	1280	3450	86	14	68	32	1280	87	13	92	8

It is obvious that the number of young people from the families of workers and farmers who wish to obtain the higher education have not decreased significantly, especially in comparison with the figure of applicants from the other regions and the country. What is decreased dramatically is the number of those belonging to this social stratum who is enrolled finally. These people are still eager to enter the University, but their chances are more and more illusory. Sure thing, this situation depends very much on the overall economic circumstances in today's Russia, but if the Government declares "the broadening of the access of the citizens of the Russian Federation to Higher Education, and inadmissibility of reduction of those students who are paid with the Federal Budget", it should accomplish this task in a proper way.

Consultations

I have conducted two rounds of the expert interview, with the University officials (vice-rectors, deans, heads of departments and chairs) and with the officials from the Committee on Higher Education and Science of the Irkutsk Region Administration.

The experts were asked the following questions: How do they apprehend the current situation with the social-geographic peculiarities of applicants and students? How do they apprehend the acting *Law on Professional and Higher Education of the Russian Federation*? What means do they consider as the most

suitable for the improving of the inequality of access to Higher Education? What the outcomes (political, financial, cultural) could such means entail should they be adapted? How do they respond to the idea of reinstatement of the practice of direct assignment of graduates? What kind of outcomes could it entail?

The results. The majority of experts expressed a deep anxiety about the situation that has formed in the University regarding the practice of enrollment and social characteristics of applicants and students. It is not a normal situation, with their words, and something should be done in order to bring the country folk as well as the people from the worker families back in the Higher School. Most of the University officials reckon that several principles of the acting Law on the Higher Education are stated not sufficiently clear and detailed. First of all, regarding the mechanisms of ensuring of the declared "broadening of the access of the Russian Federation's citizens to Higher Education, and inadmissibility of reduction of those students who are paid with the Federal Budget". According to their opinion, it is not clear, how the Government is going to put that into practice. At the same time, the officials of the Regional Administration consider this Law as quite sufficient, the shortcomings, by their opinion, depend mostly on the current general economic situation in Russia. Both of groups think that the most effectual measures of resolving the issue of inequality of access to the Higher Education should include: 1) improvement of the social policy regarding the principles of access to Higher Schools, that implies conscious and responsible policy of guarantees and preference to the certain social groups; 2) the regime of favor could be carried out through the system of preparatory courses for applicants from those social groups, - the practice that existed during the Soviet period; 3) it is necessary to hit the roots of the problem, namely – the quality and content of the primary education in the country should be significantly improved. In this connection, the idea of reinstalling of the direct assignment of the University's graduates was considered by experts as quite reasonable and feasible. The outcomes of the mentioned above measures were considered as rather positive, as for political and economical circumstances, as for the cultural ones. As concerns the possible restoration of the practice of direct assignment, the majority of experts agreed that it could entail a serious negative public resonance unless it is ensured by the certain feedback from the side of the Government, such as resolving of the living problems of young specialists (where to live and what to eat, first of all).

Options for Consideration and Recommendations

Conditions:

- 1) Necessity of the public awareness.
- 2) Necessity of initiatives from the side of both University management and public forces, such as NGOs, think tanks, prominent people.
- 3) Necessity of amendments to the Law on Professional and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, at least on the regional level.

Possible means:

- 1) To guarantee special attention and preference to applicants from the country and from the worker/farmer families. The most attractive means to accomplish that is to restore the practice of so called "worker faculties", which were established throughout the HigherSchool system in Soviet period just to enable the applicants from this social stratum to gain the additional training and tutorials before the actual application to the University. This system was abolished in 1992, though this one-year training proved to be rather effective, and many people who passed through this preparatory year finally reached the top positions in different fields of social life.
- 2) To improve the quality of primary education in the country is possible through the special policy regarding the life circumstances of the young specialists, teachers, first of all, in the village. There should be special guarantees and perquisites from the side of local and federal Governments to recent graduates of Universities in order to attract them in the country. Otherwise, the gradual moral and physical degradation of the village folk will continue. At first sight, this policy in both its dimensions will require a considerable amount of funding. But after careful consideration it proves that spending is not going to be rather dramatic. Federal and local governments could accomplish that by common efforts, providing the joint funding. The last should be directed for payment of the University teachers who will train and prepare the would-be-applicants during one year before their actual competition, - this is smallest part, - and for ensuring of the decent salary and live conditions for those graduates, who agreed to go to the village. The benefits for the last category could include also the possibility to purchase an apartment (what is still a great, almost insoluble problem) in a nearby city, or regional center with the significant discount provided by the local government (there was such a practice during the Soviet period, when many people were eager to work for several years at the North of Russia, to endure the severe living conditions there because of the Governmental guarantees that they after certain period will be provided with an opportunity to get an apartment, to purchase an expensive car, and simply because the salary at the North was very

good). Why do not restore, to the extent, this Soviet practice in a modest scope, with all necessary corrections bearing in mind the new social and economic circumstances in Russia? It certainly will affect the taxpayers, that is why it is necessary to think about adapting of special tax that should be laid in its biggest part on the so called "natural monopolies", and private sector. Russia still is the rich country with poor people, and so far she is able to share some of country's wealth with its citizens, especially, when we are talking about the future of the whole nation. What is more, there are no visible constraints raised by legal, trade, or jurisdictional issues. Such policy in the sphere of Higher Education is quite feasible. Providing that the future of nation still matters something for the Russian Government.

Implementation Issues

The proposed course of action will certainly require the legislative changes. First of all, in a part of implementation of the acting *Law on Professional and Higher education of the Russian Federation*. Namely, in defining the tools and mechanisms of real ensuring of the citizens' right to obtain Higher Education. The financial impact should be significant, but it would be unfair to lay this burden upon the average taxpayers only. As one of the ultimate goals of the reform in the sphere of Higher School in Russia is the whole reimbursement for education declared, with gradual achievement of the fee level which is accepted in highly developed countries. But, as a matter of fact, prior to adoption of this level of fee, you should achieve in this country the similar level of salary and living standard. The last is still the task of vague future, and it is obvious that for the nearest 20 years, at least, the Russian Government will have to pay the fee for a huge part of students, with a slight gradual reduction, probably. That is why there should be some qualitative changes in an implementation of the educational policy in Russia. The proposed means should be evaluated by its effectiveness, first of all, as the answer to the main question – whether the course of action improved the situation of deprivation of certain social strata of the possibilities to gain the Higher education?

Communications Analysis

The key contentious issues here are as following. 1. To ensure that in the course of implementation of the policy of guarantees and preferences to the certain social strata the other social groups will not suffer, and their right to Higher Education will not be restricted; 2) To convince the Government officials, state and private business in a necessity to direct the extra funding in the sphere of Higher School,

because it is the question of national survival, no more, no less. These issues can be managed, first of all, with the creation of a strong public support, and with the involving of broad public circles into discussion on the topic in question. As a matter of fact, the proposal relates directly to the Government reform priorities. These days the wide discussion on the problems of Higher Education and direction of reforms here is going on in this country, though, mainly in the academic circles. Russia declared itself "the SocialState", and it should be proved through the real and appropriate actions in all spheres of social life, including the sphere of the HigherSchool. In this light, the objective of communications on the issue is to obtain such conditions of the public environment that would enable to change in a proper way the policy on Higher Education in Russia, to create the terms of fair and unrestricted access to Higher School for the all social groups and strata, regardless of geographical origin and the level of income. In this case the Russian Federation will become indeed the SocialState.